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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined preschool programs for 6-year-olds in Sweden and the principles underlying children's activities. Ten preschool groups including preschool teachers, student teachers, and children were interviewed about their conceptions of content and methods of working in preschool. The results showed that the program is founded on factors and principles general to preschools, but also on principles that are specific to 6-year-olds. The activities in the 10 preschools were organized in different ways with regard to the facilities and time allocated to the groups. The teachers believed that the 6-year-olds were more capable of abstract thinking, perseverance, deduction, and curiosity than younger preschool children, and that they required a more challenging environment than younger children. The content and methods for working with the 6-year-olds were based mainly on ideas from Froebel's developmental, psychological, and social pedagogy, but were also influenced by the school tradition. The mission statements of the schools were of secondary importance in the choice of content, but are probably more important with regard to the methods of working. Greater emphasis is placed on children's social development in Swedish preschool programs than on intellectual development. (Author/AP)

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THE PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMME FOR THE SIX-YEAR-OLDS

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THE PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMME FOR THE SIX-YEAR-OLDS

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The study focuses on the pre-school programme for the six-year-olds and can be described as a qualitative study with a phenomenological approach. Pre-school teachers, student teachers and children have been interviewed about their conceptions of content and methods of working in pre-school. Observations and documents have also contributed to the data.

The results indicate that the programme for the six-year-olds as far as the choice of content and plan for the pre-school-day are concerned, mainly has its roots in the Froebelian tradition. In regard with the attitude toward the children, developmental psychological tradition is of a greatest importance while the social-pedagogical has a less impact on the six-year-olds´ activities on the whole. The goal documents are of secondary importance in the choice of content but are probably more important with regard to the methods of working.

Key words: Conceptions, developmental psychology, early childhood education, froebelian tradition, pre-school programme, six-year-olds.

THE PRE-SCHOOL PROGRAMME FOR THE SIX-YEAR-OLDS

SUMMARY

The background and purpose of the study

The focus of this study is the pre-school programme for the six-year-olds. In Sweden there are six-year-olds both in day-care centers and in part-time groups. The part-time groups are mostly only for six-year-olds. The day-care centers includes children 1-7 years. They have special groups, 1-3 hours daily, for the six-year-olds.

The purpose of the study is:

- to describe the pre-school programme for the six-year-olds,
- to investigate various conceptions of the activities involved in that programme and thereby, also to survey the differences between various groups and forms of organisation in the pre-school,
- to compare teachers', students' and children's conceptions of activities for the six-year-olds,
- to try to understand and explain the factors behind the emphasis, the content and the methods in the pre-school activities aimed at the six-year-olds.

Observations and documents, as well as interviews have been used in order to clarify the first problem, which seeks to describe how the activities for the six-year-olds are planned and organized and the present content and methods of these activities. The study does not, however, primarily focus on describing what the activities for the six-year-olds really contain or how they are arranged, but how they are interpreted by the persons involved in them. These conceptions have been used to expound the second and third problem. The analysis, that tries to explain the content and design of the activities for the six-year-olds and elucidates the fourth problem, has been based on three different traditions, the Frobelian, the developmental psychological and the social-pedagogical as

well as on the present guidelines and goal documents for the pre-school. Also the traditions and expectations of the compulsory school, which also have an influence on the activities for the six-year-olds, are included in the analysis.

Four different theories have, furthermore, been used in the analysis: Theories of cultural-reproduction, cognitive theories, Bronfenbrenners' develop-mental-ecological theory and curriculum theories.

The study also contains a historical description of how the Swedish pre-school has developed in the light of the three above-mentioned traditions, as well as the research and development work that has been carried out in connection with the practical activities of the pre-school.

Methods

This disseratation can be defined as a qualitative study with a phenome-nolo-gical approach. The study involves ten pre-school groups, where pre-school teachers, student teachers and children have been interviewed about their conceptions of the activities for the six-year-olds.

The main part of the data for the study has been collected by individual interviews with working pre-school teachers and those who intend to be pre-school teachers. In the ten pre-school groups children have also been interviewed. The interviews with the children have been done in groups consisting of four children, one group from each pre-school.

The interviews have been recorded and then transcribed. A phenomeno-grafical methodology has been used to carry out interviews which have then been treated and analysed in accordance with a model given by Spiegelberg.

Further information has been introduced into the data through observa-tions. The observations have been carried out as diary notes written down after the visits to the pre-schools.

Documents in form of the pre-school teachers' own plans for the pro-gramme have been used, as a third source of information mainly in the study of the content in the six-year-olds' activities.

Results

Description of the activities

The study shows that the activities in the ten pre-schools are organized in different ways as far as the facilities and time allocated to the groups are concerned. The part-time groups have permanent rooms at their disposal, where they have activities during three hours every day or four hours four days a week. In the day-care centers the six-year-olds have their own room or corner where they meet between one and three hours a day, two to five days a week.

There are many similarities between the present pre-schools as regards content and set-up of the daily programme. All the pre-schools have: gathering in a circle (circle time), group activities, activities for motoric training and outdoors activities as part of their daily routine. Free play is included in the daily programme in all the part-time groups. In the day-care centers, however free play is not always included in the six-year-olds' special activities but is instead, included in the other time the six-year-olds spend in the day-care center.

The content has a traditional character and is based mainly on the changing seasons, the celebration of the high festivals and the local community, or expressed in terms of the Swedish pedagogical programme for the pre-school i. e. Nature, Culture and Society. The traditional elements are well represented in the present pre-schools but there is very little relating to a modern changing society.

Basis for the six-year-olds activities

The pre-school teachers and also the student teachers are of the opinion that the six-year-olds are different from and need different activities than the younger pre-school children. The six-year-olds are more capable of abstract thinking, they have more perseverance and power of deduction and they are curious to know and learn. This justifies more advanced and intellectually more challenging tasks. According to the stated conceptions, working methods is the decisive factor determining how the six-year-olds, with their motivation intact, will learn in a constructive way, that makes them understand and gives a deeper, permanent kind of knowledge. The working methods that are considered to be most suitable for the six-year-olds have knowledge of the children - their experiences, interests, knowledge and needs as their point of departure. The methods must be characterized by adventures, play, movement and creative activities, as well

as challenges for the thought in a secure and tolerant atmosphere with competent and interested grown-ups.

A strong reason for gathering the six-year-olds in a separate group of their own is the fact that the children will begin school the following year. The pre-school teachers think that the children need to get to know each other, learn to be and work together in the group which, also in most cases will be their group at school. Another reason is that the children need preparation for the methods of working used at school and that means, according to the pre-school teachers, a passive reception of knowledge. This conception is contrary to the ones expressed earlier on, and is founded on stereotyped ideas of the school, which, in turn means that the pre-school teachers may have insufficiant knowledge about the way the schools work today. The conceptions expressed by the pre-school teachers vary in depth. The conceptions about how to work with and how to behave toward the children in the pre-school, have their basis in the knowledge about and the experience of how children learn and develop and are deeply rooted in the consciousness of the teachers. The conceptions about how the school works and what the teachers there demand and expect from the children when they begin school, are reversely of superficial character. These conceptions are not built on knowledge about real conditions and realistic demands or expectations of the teachers at school.

The co-operation with the children's parents has always been concidered a very important issue in pre-school.The opinions with reference to the six-year-olds are no different. The pre-school teachers are anxious about recieving acceptance from the parents concerning the planned programme and they are open to suggestions as regards the content and activities, even if they, by virtue of their education, want to have the last word. Also this idea of the parents' great importance for the work at the pre-school, can be considered a deeply rooted one in the sense that it is grounded in experience and knowledge. Other examples of such deep conceptions are these that describe the pre-school teachers' basic pedagogical beliefs and which lead to different ways of approaching the children.

The student teachers' conceptions are not deep in the same way as the pre-school-teachers'. The students have in many cases, a superficial knowledge about and modest experience of the activities for the six-year-olds. They, already however, have comprehensive knowledge about how children learn and develop and about what they need, and naturally they have also experiences of children in general. The value of the students' contribution is above all, in the outsider's perspective that reflects the pree-

school activities and in many aspects also confirms the pre-school teachers' ideas.

The children's conceptions are of a superficial character. The questions posed to the children were intended to clarify how they understand the purpose behind the activities directed at them and what they understand they are learning. The children are able to express *what* they are doing in the group, whereas their conceptions about the purpose of the activities are superficial and they are not able to explain *why* they must do what they do. The children's conceptions indicate that they do not understand much of what the pre-school teachers really intend the cildren to learn in terms of a planned content. On the other hand, the children provide several examples of having understood rules and norms set for them in terms of order and behaviour that can be traced back to the more or less hidden curriculum.

Similarities and differences between groups and spheres of activities

The pre-school teachers' and the student teachers' conceptions describe both basic principles concerning the pre-school in general and principles and standpoints exclusively concerning the six-year-olds' programme. Both groups agree that the basic principles for the general pre-school programme are:*Care for the children* - they must have fun, get on well and feel safe and secure, *Children must be given possibilities* - to develop self-confidence, be independent and develop in every way, *Development takes place in a group* - the children must learn to show consideration, listen to each other and dare to express themselves, and *Emphasis on everybody's equal worth.*

The conceptions are also in agreement as far as learning is concerned. Children learn when they are interested, through experiences, by seeing, listening, examining and playing. It is the teacher's task to stimulate the children's interest and to show that it is interesting to learn. The programme in the six-year-olds' group must emanate from the children's experiences and needs, give them new experiences and plenty of space for free play and motoric activities.

There are differences in the structure of the descriptions of basic pedagogical beliefs. The pre-school teachers' basic beliefs are described from the perspective of a teacher's role and the relations to the children - *The pre-school teacher as a model, The pre-school teacher as a stimulation factor and The pre-school teacher as a conversation partner and a security factor*, while the students' conceptions are described from the

perspective of the activities and the children in the activities. *Child-centered, Subject-centered and Change-seeking.*

The pre-school teachers and the student teachers have similar conceptions also concerning phenomena more specific to the six-year-olds' groups.They have similar, often stereotyped, conceptions about how the school is and what kind of demands and expectations the teachers in school have toward the children.

Concerning the development of the six-year-olds in relation to the younger children and how they can best be prepared for the school, there are a variety in conceptions within the groups but a similar outcome for the two groups.

The differences in the conceptions between the groups can be observed in the question about learning in the pre-school. The pre-school teachers are very cautious when they express themselves about what they want the children to learn during the year in the group for the six-year-olds, while the student teachers dare to give examples of such elements as can be considered knowledge and skills, e.g., to teach the children mathematical concepts.

The student teachers emphasize also, more than the pre-school teachers a democratic approach to the children, while the pre-school teachers lay a greater emphasis on the satisfaction to work with the six-year-olds.

The differences in the conceptions between the pre-school teachers who are working in part-time groups and these who are working in day-care center groups is manifest only in one point. The part-time group teachers have a rather negative attitude toward the activities which are arranged in the six-year-olds' group in day-care centers, while the teachers in the day-care centers consider co-operation with the part-time groups as something positive and do not, therefore, have a corresponding negative attitude toward the activities there.

The traditions in the six-year-olds programme

The Froebelian tradition is obvious in the six-year-olds' activities, above all in the choice of content as for example the changing seasons and celebrating of the high festivals .The tehmatic working methods and the devision of the pre-school day into circle-time, group activities, free play and out-door activities are other examples which have their source in Froebels pedagogy.

The developmental psychological tradition manifests itself primarily in the conceptions of what a child is and the emphasis on children's develop-

ment and needs. Attention is particularly called to the six-year-olds' tremendous need of movement and the balance between stationary motional activities. The child's social development is emphazised more than other developmental factors also as regards the six-year-olds.

The social pedagogical tradition is not so obvious in the six-year-olds activities as in the activities for the younger children. It can, nevertheless, be traced in the content that deals with, for instance, health and hygiene, and also in the relations to the children's parents.

Besides the three traditions, of pre-school pedagogy, traces are also to be found of the school tradition, which manifests itself in e.g. the teacher role, working methods and choice of special school prepatory materials.

The traditions have a strong hold in the arrangement, content and methods of working, which entails that modern and more up-to-date elements, have not had a strong position in the programme. It is important to pass on the traditions, but it is also of very great importance that the children will be prepared for a life as grown-ups in a modern society with those requirements and expectations which to day's humans are confronted with.

The importance of the goal documents

Barnstugeutredningens description of aims is still in force as an official goal for the pre-school programme and is also restated in the pedagogical programme of today and is undoubtedly of great importance also in the practical work in the six-year-olds' activities in the pre-school.

Arbetsplanen Förskola-lågstadium Samverkan för kontinuitet recommanded certain pre-school pedagogical working methods for the six-year-olds' groups and repudiated materials in form of published workbooks intended to prepare children for the school. Besides working on the basis of the pre-school pedagogical foundations, it was stated the important goals for the pre-school were, to stimulate the children's interests and inclination to learn, and to create a positive attitude toward the school. This plan of action, that in its some fifty pages contains still valid clarifications an recommendations for the work with the six-year-olds and the contact with the school, seems to be practically unknown among the pre-school teachers and has, consequently, played a subordinate role in the choice of content and methods of working for the six-year-olds' groups in this study.

Pedagogiskt program för förskolan gives general recommendations for the work in the pre-school. The recommendations that involve the content

exemplify as well traditional as more modern elements, but it is the traditional elements, that are given preference in the six-year-olds' activities. The modern elements are scarecely represented. The pre-school teachers in this study refer to the pedagogical programme as an usable document. Some local authorities also give the staff recommendations to follow the programme. In spite of that one can feel doubtful about the real importance of the programme for the present pre-schools, considering that the traditional elements, take practically all the space in the programme. It can be expressed as follows: one does what one is used to doing and what always has been done with the six-year-olds in the pre-school.

Conclusions

The programme for the six-year-olds is founded both on factors and basic principles which concern the general pre-school programme and factors and standpoints specific for the six-year-olds' groups.

The content and methods of working in the six-year-olds' group are based mainly on the traditions from Froebels' pedagogy, developmental psychology and social pedagogy, but are influenced also by the school tradition. In comparison with the traditions, the goal documents have, less importance for the content and set-up of the programme.

The pre-school teachers and also the student teachers emphasize the children's social developmentmore than the intellectual. Above all, the pre-school teachers have a cautious attitude towards stimulating the children's intellectual development.

There is a special pre-school pedagogy with common basic principles, that has its basis in the knowledge about how children learn and develop, but when the six-year-olds are concerned, one now deviates from that in favor of a more school-oriented view. A cautious clonclusion from this is, that the pre-school teachers not always consciously choose the content and methods of working based on pedagogical position derived from the knowledge about how children learn and develop.

The pre-school teachers pay a great deal of attention to the parents' opinions and desires and they are working purposefully in order to establish

good relations and co-operation with the children's parents.

The children have a negligible direct influence on the content and forms in the programme.

The children are able to express *what* they do in the pre-school group and *what* is expected of them in way of rules and norms, but they have vague conceptions about *why* they do what they do or the real purpose with the six-year olds' group activities and what they learn there.

The content of the programme can be understood and explained, above all, on the basis of the theories of cultural reproduction. The pre-school teachers' intentions to create security and work for the development of good relations in the group can be understood and explained in the light of developmental ecological theories The pre-school teachers' expressed conceptions correspond with the constructivistic view on how knowledge develops. The pre-school teachers' conceptions and applications of the goal documents can be undestood and explained on the basis of a curriculum theoretical model.

A more detailed version is to be found in Swedish in the doctoral dissertation entitled. *Förskolans program för sexåringar*. Morsing Berglund, B. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994.

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